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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 8120

INFO RUEHZS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS IMMEDIATE

RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING IMMEDIATE 7408

RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA IMMEDIATE 9924

RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL IMMEDIATE 5741

RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO IMMEDIATE 1873

RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON IMMEDIATE 0078

RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE

RHMFIS/CJCS WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE

RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE

RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI IMMEDIATE

RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI IMMEDIATE

RUEKDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 002195

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/31/2019

TAGS: PREL PGOV PTER PINS KDEM TH

SUBJECT: COUP RUMORS REAPPEAR BUT EVEN REDS DOUBT THEM

REF: BANGKOK 2125

Classified By: Ambassador Eric G. John, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

**¶11. (C)** Summary and Comment. Despite renewed rumors of potential military intervention in the political conflict, spread as far as we can tell by anti-government red-shirt sources, Royal Thai Army (RTA) Commander in Chief General Anupong Paochinda appears resolute in his stance in keeping the Army out of politics. The Army Commander was confident and relaxed during a recent dinner with the Ambassador, and confirmed speculation that his Chief of Staff General Prayut would be his hand-picked successor in October 2010 when Anupong must retire. Furthermore, while some red-shirt leaders shared with us the coup rumors in mid-August, they admitted to us the rumors appeared unjustified. End Summary and Comment.

RUMORS CONTINUE BUT ANUPONG APPEARS STEADFASTLY OPPOSED

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**¶12. (C)** Coup rumors have periodically churned the Thai political scene ever since Thailand returned to a democratically-elected government in the December 2007 election won by the People's Power Party, which was comprised primarily of Thaksin loyalists. While the possibility of a coup was theoretically more imaginable when the government was run by Thaksin-nominees Samak Sundaravej and Somchai Wongsuwan in 2008, Army Commander General Anupong Paochinda remained steadfast in his view, expressed both privately and publicly, that it would be counterproductive to involve the military in trying to resolve Thailand's political conflict. Despite Anupong's determination, rumors of the military intervening again began to creep into discussions of the political situation in August. We assess that the latest round of rumors are unfounded.

**¶13. (C)** Recent coup rumors have been linked to the controversy over appointing a replacement for Police Chief Patcharawat Wongsuwan (Defense Minister Prawit's brother), who faces mandatory retirement at the end of September (reftel), and to a recent trip to Singapore by some of Thailand's military leaders. These and other rumors appear to be nothing more than speculation or a resumption of the P.R. campaign waged by the reds since Samak Sundaravej became Prime Minister in early 2008, apparently to stir public umbrage and a priori public condemnation and international pressure on the military.

ARMY COMMANDER' RESOLVE APPEARS UNCHANGED

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¶14. (C) Anupong, since assuming command in October 2007, has been resolute in insisting that the military should stay out of politics and allow Thailand's elected representatives work through the political conflict. Throughout his time as commander, Anupong has publicly and privately maintained that there was no suitable role for the military to play in achieving political resolution. His views of a coup not being a viable means to bring about political calm have been confirmed to us repeatedly by those with the most direct access to him on a daily basis.

¶15. (C) Visits earlier this year to the Northeastern provinces of Nong Khai, Ubon Ratchatani, and Buriram validated the view that the Thai Army has reined back political activities under the command of General Anupong. A wide range of contacts - from politicians to academics to monks - all confirmed that, beginning with the command turnover from General Sonthi Boonyaratklin to Anupong, the RTA has all but ceased attempts to influence the political environment.

¶16. (C) In a sign further militating against coup rumors, our Army Attaché escorted Anupong to Tokyo to attend the recent U.S.-sponsored Pacific Army Chiefs Conference. That Anupong took part in this overseas visit at the time of coup rumors goes far in disputing their validity.

CONTROL OF ARMY APPEARS TO BE IN SOLID HANDS

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¶17. (C) Some rumors of the possibility of a coup have been based on a theory that a three-way split exists in the Army, with the camps roughly divided among those who support Thaksin, those who support Anupong's stance, and more hardline anti-Thaksin figures. For instance, former FM Prasong Sunsiri, seen as one of the inspirations behind the 2006 coup and the anti-Thaksin People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) movement, alleged to us in May that two battalions remain loyal to Thaksin, an armored unit based in Saraburi, and an infantry battalion in the Kanchanaburi-based Ninth Infantry Regiment; Prasong attributed coup rumors on April 12 to uncoordinated/unapproved movements involving these two battalions that day. The alleged split in the military is used to intimate a coup is possible on the basis that Anupong does not have firm control of the Army.

¶18. (C) While the Thai army has been factionalized throughout most of the past sixty years, we do not believe the "Anupong losing control" scenario. In a recent dinner at the Residence with the Ambassador, Anupong was relaxed and confident. He was forthcoming and appeared comfortable with his control of the Army, with little apparent worry about the political conflict impacting his legacy in RTA.

¶19. (C) Anupong candidly told the Ambassador that the next Army Commander would be RTA Chief of Staff Prayut Chan-o-cha, also in attendance at the dinner. (Note: Prayut has long been close to Anupong; Army contacts confirm Prayut will become Deputy Army Commander in the upcoming October 1 reshuffle. End Note.) While Anupong's close ties to the Palace are well-known, Prayut is seen to be even closer, particularly to the Queen.

¶10. (C) RTA sources have also confirmed media reports that Major General Podok Bunnag will become the Army Special Warfare Commander. MG Podok was a military prep school classmate of General Prayut, and this move would insure that best trained and equipped RTA units will be loyal to Anupong and Prayut. A similar situation exists in the critical First Army Area which controls the forces in and around Bangkok.

EVEN THE REDS PRIVATELY DOUBT THE RUMORS (BUT SPREAD THEM)

111. (C) As far as we can tell, the latest bout of rumors is sourced entirely within the anti-government, pro-Thaksin red-shirt camp, with the likely intent to keep its core base fired up in the weeks leading up to the September 19 anniversary of the 2006 coup. This view was confirmed to us August 28 by a leading analyst with close contacts on all sides of the political spectrum who had tracked all the rumors back to the reds. Furthermore, core United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) activists Jaran Dittaphichai and Sean Boonprakong acknowledged privately to us in recent weeks that they doubted the validity of the coup rumors. We met with Jaran on August 14 (during the military leaders' visit to Singapore). While Jaran shared the latest rumint with us, he admitted it seemed highly unlikely. During an August 21 meeting with Sean Boonprakong, Boonprakong also told us that he had noticed an uptick in coup rumors over the course of the past couple of weeks, but stressed that he found them less than credible. According to Sean, the military had no motive to carry out a coup.

JOHN